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THE FUTURE OF CRETE.

BY H. N. BRAILSFORD.

IN the early spring of 1898, a year after the Greco-Turkish war, I was sitting under the orange-trees outside a wayside inn near a remote mountain village in Crete. The graybeards of the place formed a circle, eager to question the stranger who had come from the mysterious world where consuls and admirals were deciding the destinies of the island. A young doctor, educated in Athens, the only member of the group who wore European clothes, sat at the right hand of the handsome old captain of the local insurgents, while the rank and file, respectful, silent and well-disciplined, listened at a distance. There was much to discuss and much to explain. The crisis was now dallying through its second year. The war-ships of the European Powers still patrolled the coast, causing not a little suffering by their strict blockade. Greece was defeated, passive and impotent. It remained for the Concert to speak the decisive word. I had some definite news to give. The Powers had at last made up their minds to grant autonomy. They would not permit the union of Crete with Greece, but they would concede self-government and reduce the Sultan's authority to a name and a shadow. The doctor alone seemed pleased; and, in the awkward pause which followed, one of the patriarchs began whispering to him. "What is this thing 'autonomy'?" asked the peasant. "Oh!" answered the doctor, "it's a very good arrangement, though it isn't union. It means that, instead of sending our taxes to Athens, we shall spend them ourselves." But still the old man looked sullen and worried. Suddenly an idea struck him, and with an inimitable smile of peasant cunning, he exclaimed, "We'll find some way of sending our taxes to Athens secretly!"

In that quaint answer, with its magnificent stupidity, its brain-

less idealism, lies the whole Cretan question. Europe has to deal with a gallant and obstinate peasant race, in whose minds this fixed idea of union with Greece has become an ineradicable passion. It is not so much a policy as an instinct. It is not an interested suggestion fostered by Athenian statesmen on behalf of Greece; still less is it a conception which the educated Cretans have forced upon the masses. Its hottest partisans are the simplest mountaineers. It rests on no process of reasoning or calculation. Every Cretan knows that Greece is ruined financially and politically, her administration faction-ridden, her army worthless and her future compromised. He knows that, in accepting her flag, he would have to submit to conscription and to a heavy burden of taxation. But, with the reckless exaltation of his race, he makes light of these drawbacks. It is at once the strength and the weakness of the Greek that he abandons himself without reserve to any ideal which claims his allegiance. There is nothing which even the least instructed Cretan would refuse to sacrifice to "Hellenism," and Hellenism demands the union of the Greek race under the Greek crown. The population of Crete is, perhaps, the purest Greek stock to be found in the Levant, and it cherishes a superb tradition of patriotism. It preserved its language, its literature and its manhood, while the rest of the Greek world lay passive beneath the Turkish yoke. It took a splendid part in the War of Independence. Given over by Europe first to Egyptian and then to Turkish rule, it protested in a bloody series of revolts, which renewed themselves with obstinate regularity throughout the last century at intervals of a decade. Its whole life of effort and hope for three generations has centred in this dream of union; and, after braving massacre, repression and devastation in a secular defiance of its Mohammedan oppressors, it cannot bring itself to-day to acquiesce, half-liberated, half-satisfied, in the languid veto of Christian Europe.

To understand why the Cretans are once more defying Europe behind the rampart of their mountains, we must trace in brief the history of the seven years which have elapsed since the Turkish troops were expelled from the island. The provisional régime which was inaugurated at the close of 1898, with Prince George of Greece as High Commissioner with a mandate from Europe, began with bright hopes and brilliant auguries. Nothing remained of Turkish authority save a single crescent ensign floating

on a rock in Suda Bay. Prince George was a Greek, by education if not by blood, popular because of the sea-breeze which he brought with him, and respected by these simple mountaineers for his superb physique. Greek became henceforward the official language; the legal code was modelled on that of the Hellenic kingdom; even the flag was composed of the beloved colors. The whole island draped itself in white and blue, determined to be thoroughly Greek, though it could not be a part of Greece. Its mood, moreover, was hopeful yet moderate; and a certain diffidence and conservatism chastened the confidence with which it welcomed the future. The peasants came in a passion of enthusiasm for peace, storming down from their villages, to surrender their rifles at the Canea arsenal. As they surged under the great Venetian gates, they scratched a cross upon them to signify that the reign of the infidel tyrant was ended. They had no longer a right to win or an enemy to oppose, and they disarmed to prove their perfect confidence in their new ruler. Their leaders, meanwhile, were translating that confidence into a deplorably autocratic constitution. They distrusted themselves; they knew their own tendency to faction and feud; they had studied the unhappy failure of unchecked democracy in Greece itself. "Europe," said a splendid veteran of four revolts in my hearing, "has put a fiddle in our hands, and we do not know how to hold the bow." And somewhat too simply they gave the bow to Prince George. The constitution made him an autocrat. His ministers are mere secretaries appointed by him and responsible only to him. The representative chamber, which meets only once in two years, is only three parts elective, while the other members are nominated by the Prince. Its functions, moreover, are merely deliberative, and it can exercise no real check upon either the Prince or his ministers. The whole official hierarchy of the island depends directly on the Prince, who can appoint or dismiss at his pleasure. It was a tremendous power to confer upon a young and untried man, whose only administrative experience had been gained in commanding a flotilla of torpedo-boats. He came with no great name for wisdom—he was said to be a commonplace devotee of commonplace pleasures; and the business of ruling a little island where there is no "society," and where even the leaders of local opinion delight to wear their picturesque peasant costume, very soon began to pall upon him. Prince

George began to compare himself to Napoleon on St. Helena and Dreyfus on the Devil's Isle. The result was that the real business of governing fell into the hands of his Greek secretary, and the Cretans began to complain that they were being exploited for the benefit of this gentleman's personal friends, strangers from Athens, who neither knew nor loved the islanders. It may have been necessary to import a certain number of experts, but these highly paid Greek functionaries were, unhappily, as incompetent as they were unpopular. The Cretans have an intense enthusiasm for "Hellenism" in the abstract, and desire a union with Greece; but they have no exaggerated respect for the Greeks of the mainland, who are, as far as my observation goes, morally and physically their inferiors. Indeed, I often used to suspect that the true Cretan, in his secret mind, imagines that union means the annexation of Greece to Crete.

It was true, no doubt, that Crete had obtained autonomy, and that the Sultan retained no vestige of power over its internal affairs. But, economically, it was still tied to the bankrupt Ottoman system. The Turk is not the only tax-gatherer in the Levant. The European bondholder, who has a mortgage over so many of the best sources of revenue in the Turkish Empire, has to be reckoned with, even after the Porte has been eliminated. His shadow darkens Cyprus, despite the English annexation; and his presence is still felt in Crete. The Turkish tariff is regulated by international treaties, while certain taxes, surtaxes and monopolies are earmarked for the service of the Ottoman Public Debt. Crete remains in theory a part of the Empire, and it must pay year by year its share of its former conqueror's debts. Whatever its local needs may be, it cannot increase its import dues to suit its own requirements; they are fixed by the will of Europe. The result is that Crete, during all these years, has been struggling with an inadequate revenue, to make good the ruin and the devastation caused by long misrule and periodic revolts. In many districts, the olive groves had been cut down during the civil war, and villages burned to the ground. The roads were decidedly worse than they normally are in Turkey, and one could say nothing more damaging about a road than this. The harbors, where once great fleets of Venetian galleys could ride in comfort, were neglected and ruinous, and quite unsuitable for any but the smallest coasting steamers. The Church possesses considerable

funds, but as it still depends directly on the Patriarchate in Constantinople, these funds cannot be appropriated even for the maintenance of schools. There was talk, when I left the island in 1899, of inducing French capital to develop the vineyards, and of inviting a German syndicate to construct a railway; but foreign investors refuse to adventure under a régime so manifestly unstable and provisional. The result has been that all the projects which the Cretan leaders used to discuss before Prince George arrived—their national schools, their agricultural college, their cooperative dairies on the Danish model—have remained mere memories of disappointment. The economic state of the island is no better than it was under the Turks, and some observers even go so far as to say that it is actually worse. It is no want of capacity which explains this failure. The law-courts are said to be honest and reliable, and the *gendarmérie* under Italian instructors, is, by all accounts, a model force. But, without the power to raise money by some more elastic system of taxation, there can be no economic progress; and, so long as Crete remains an integral part of the Ottoman Empire, it cannot hope for fiscal freedom. The little crescent flag in Suda Bay has turned out, after all, to mean something. It is as ever the symbol for fetters and stagnation.

Here, then, were powerful arguments for change. A provisional arrangement which involved a mild but decidedly illiberal despotism, on the one hand, and economic stagnation, on the other, could not be popular; and its failure only reinforced the hereditary instinct of the Cretans in favor of union with Greece. The more they manifested their discontent, the more the administration exaggerated its original tendency to arbitrary and personal rule. It is some years since I have been in Crete, and I should not like to speak too positively of Prince George's mistakes; but I have met no European who has lived in the island who had a good word to say for his administration. On the one hand, he played the despot. The local independent newspapers were destroyed, and the right of public meeting withdrawn. Worst of all, the mayors and prefects, who had originally been elected by the inhabitants of their districts, were degraded to the position of mere officials nominated by the Prince. At the same time, he aspired to be a sort of party leader. He toured about, making violent political speeches whenever an election was in

progress, and organized his army of placemen who depended on his personal favor into a cohort of partisans. Quite early in his term of office, he contrived to alienate the best men among the leaders who had conducted the insurrection with so much patience and wisdom. The President of the Provisional Government, Dr. Sphakianakis, an extremely able and, what is rarer, a wise and disinterested man, went into retirement when the Prince arrived. He is a man of great experience and moderation, a student by temperament, steeped in his metaphysics and his sciences, but so generally respected that a word from him could always restrain the hottest heads from excesses during the angriest period of the revolution. Why such a man should have had to give way to a young Prince, of no conspicuous ability and no particular education, is one of the mysteries of politics. Before two years were up, his two chief lieutenants, MM. Venizelos and Fournis, were dismissed by Prince George from the ministry. They are younger men, but able, energetic, and fertile in ideas which may yet prove the salvation of the island. A violent personal feud sprang up between the Prince and the veteran Captain Hadjimichali, a patriarch who had led the mountaineers in many a victorious fight against the Turks long before Prince George was cradled. By the summer of last year, when the Prince cast Professor Jannaris, a philologist of European reputation, into Canea gaol, the rift between himself and his people had become desperate. Deputations waited on him in vain with petitions and remonstrances; his manner of insulting and browbeating them only gave a bitter personal aspect to a grave political dispute. It was now quite clear that no solution remained save union with Greece. To Prince George it provided an honorable and graceful path of retreat. He could retire and bring with him in his withdrawal a great gift to the Greek nation, and confer, at the same time, contentment on Crete. To the Cretans, it meant an escape from the despotism and the economic bondage of the previous six years. Greece is not a model state, but at least, it has a democratic constitution. Any permanent solution seemed better than a state of uncertainty and unrest, which prevented the influx of capital and kept men's minds in constant turmoil. Prince George, accordingly, devoted the closing months of 1904 to a tour among the European courts. The Powers had never intended to make him the permanent sovereign of Crete. His mandate was only

for three years, and it had already been prolonged for a second term. He urged that the time had at length arrived for a definite solution, which could only be a union with Greece. But either his pleading was half-hearted or the Powers were deaf. His term was once more extended, and he was weak enough, or vain enough, to accept the dangerous mission. He returned to Crete and reported his failure.

What followed is recent history. For a month or two the Cretans were passive, and then suddenly they rose in arms. A sort of provisional government was established at Therisso, a stronghold in the mountains, near enough to Canea to threaten the Prince's administration, far enough from the sea to be out of range of the European war-ships. Dr. Sphakianakis and M.M. Venizelos and Fournis are at its head, and it soon received the allegiance of the whole interior. Simultaneously, under very strained conditions, a general election was held; and, though the members were probably drawn for the most part from the Prince's party, the Chamber adopted the programme of the insurgents and solemnly proclaimed the annexation of the island to Greece. The Prince threatened, but he had no force behind him; and he too could only reiterate his prayer that Europe should assent to union. It is a whimsical display of unanimity. In other lands, subjects rebel to emphasize some difference of opinion with their rulers. The Cretans have taken up arms to prove how violently they all agree.

It is only necessary to sum up the moral which lies on the surface of this brief historical survey, in order to state the case for union. A mind which acknowledges any allegiance to democratic principles will ask for no special pleading. The Cretans themselves demand it, steadily and with unanimity, and that, in the absence of any overwhelming reason on the other side, should be argument enough. They are not a wild race of turbulent and inconsequent rebels. Even the peasants, for all their simplicity, are remarkably intelligent and even well-informed. Illiteracy is exceedingly rare among the men. They have the Greek passion for letters. I have heard a little wandering pedler passing the long hours of a winter night entertaining a group of storm-stayed travellers in a wayside inn by reciting long extracts from the *Odyssey*. Their leaders are often men of judgment and culture.

I knew most of the men who are now the chiefs of the insurgents at Therisso. One of them used to carry about with him a little pocket edition of Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason," which he was trying to translate into modern Greek during the lulls of the last insurrection. Another could entertain us with recitations from a repertory of six or seven plays of Æschylus and Sophocles which he knew by heart. A third surprised me, during the discussions which preceded the drafting of the Constitution, by the variety and thoroughness of his knowledge of constitutional law—he was forever balancing an English principle against a French, or citing some provision from the then recent German code. It is a little ridiculous for a few European diplomatists to affect to treat such men as minors unfit to judge for themselves, or to carve out their own destinies. We are too apt to talk about the majesty of the Concert, as though it were some sublime abstraction. It resolves itself into half a dozen permanent officials, who have studied the problem only through the medium of consular reports, and who have developed a certain bloodless indifference from a long habit of handling human affairs without ever coming into contact with men. They approach the problem as a nuisance. They oppose a sort of bureaucratic inertia to the idea of any change. They know that any alteration of the *status quo* involves some trouble and some effort, and their whole bias is to postpone it until it is forced upon them. They probably feel that the Cretans, by taking up arms and making an unseemly disturbance, have transgressed against international good form; they resent the conduct of the Cretans in doing so, and feel that to yield to such insistence would be to create an inconvenient precedent. They forget that things have come to this pass only because they themselves have neglected their duty as the guardians and protectors of Crete. Prince George is not a sovereign in his own right. He is merely the High Commissioner of Europe. It was the business of Europe to watch his proceedings with some attention and concern. A word from the Powers, at any time during the last six years, would have checked his arbitrary rule and induced him to modify the Constitution. A few reforms in this sense a year ago would probably have averted the present rising.

There is only one respectable argument which can be raised against union, from the standpoint of international politics. It

may, indeed, be urged with great cogency that Crete itself might suffer from a too close association with the rather corrupt political world of Athens; but, after all, the Cretans are mature enough and intelligent enough to assess such risks for themselves. What diplomacy fears is, rather, that the annexation of Crete to Greece may have an undesirable influence upon the Macedonian complication. There is some force in this reasoning. Bulgaria might, conceivably, ask for compensations, and demand the annexation of Macedonia as a set-off to the aggrandizement of her rival. It would be an insincere claim, for there is really no parallel between Crete and Macedonia. The Cretans are all Greeks and demand union. A considerable minority of the Macedonian population is non-Bulgarian, and what the Bulgars demand is not union with Bulgaria, but autonomy. But it is just possible that Bulgaria might make use of the precedent. Certainly, the Greeks fear that she would do so. In all this curious situation, the oddest feature is that the Greek Government has declined to give the Cretans the slightest encouragement. Eight years ago, Greece sent a little army to annex Crete. To-day, she will not even address a note to the Powers. In principle, she is as eager as ever for the union. But she is profoundly anxious about Macedonia and prefers to concentrate all her efforts on the preservation of her influence there. Sooner or later, Crete must be hers, whereas her chances in Macedonia are exceedingly slender. One may admit that the annexation of Crete to Greece would have a certain reflex and indirect effect upon the Macedonian question. But would it, necessarily, make for evil? In the first place, by distracting the attention of the Greeks to Crete it would lessen the tension of the present internecine strife between Greeks and Bulgars within Macedonia itself—a feud which is devastating the country, ruining both races morally and financially, and creating an anarchy which would defy even an earnest attempt at reform. In the second place, even if a change in Crete should precipitate a crisis in Macedonia, it has first to be proved that a crisis is undesirable. Could anything well be worse than the eternal delays, the constant unrest, the insincere reforms, the patchwork solutions which drag on from year to year in that most miserable corner of Europe?

The Cretans have one circumstance in their favor. It will be uncommonly difficult to coerce them, if they are really determined

to reject a compromise. Prince George has no force of his own. There are, of course, the international contingents concentrated in the seaports. But even these are not numerous, and they would find the conquest of an elusive enemy in a mountainous and sterile country a rather difficult task. That is, one hopes, an undertaking on which three liberal Powers would embark not without some shame and reluctance. It is, indeed, a possibility which one may almost dismiss, for the simple reason that it would render the position of Prince George totally untenable. He is not in favor at present, but if he were to call in foreign troops to repress a revolt of his subjects and to prevent the union of Crete with Greece which the whole Greek race desires, he would be regarded, with some justice, not only in Crete, but throughout the Levant, as an enemy of Hellenism. It seems, then, as if the Cretans might, if they so chose, defy the Powers with comparative impunity. The Ambassadors of the four guardian Powers in Rome, who form the responsible Committee charged with the management of Cretan affairs, are now drafting a belated list of reforms. If they could inaugurate a constitutional régime and give to the island some measure of economic freedom, there seems at a first glance no reason why it should not be moderately happy. But the passionate sentiment in favor of union has to be reckoned with, and it has now been thoroughly aroused. It seems too much to hope that the Cretans should ever again take Prince George to their hearts. And, lastly, no temporary arrangement, however good in itself, is likely to bring that rest to men's minds and that influx of capital which are absolutely necessary, if Crete is to become contented and prosperous. What the Powers refuse to-day, they will certainly have to concede at no very distant date in the future. The generous and the liberal course is to remove a veto which cannot be maintained forever, and generosity is often the wiser statesmanship. This rugged island, with its simple population of mountaineers, whose only foible is their ardent love of liberty, can never be a menace to the world's peace. To refuse what it demands is to display at once an exaggerated fear and a somewhat churlish indifference. The Cretans ask only for the common human privilege of disposing of their own destinies. It is the weakness of the diplomatic mind that it considers the consequences too curiously, and ignores the plain question of right.

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